



The North Texas Skeptic

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An Indian Perspective

By Prasad Golla

Skullduggery

One of the main reasons I am a skeptic today is because of my parents' immensely endowed credulity. I have recently cornered my father to the position where he now defends that everyone's beliefs should be respected – hoping, possibly, that his should.

One of India's major weeklies (*India Today*, January 27, 2003) published that in Uttar Pradesh (a Northern state in the Indian union) the trade in monkey skulls, of late, has "assumed rampant proportions."

The monkey skulls are in demand because some villagers 'believe' that they have medicinal virtues, cast off evil spirits, and cure hallucinations in children when placed under their pillows.

Monkeys are being slaughtered in a country where they are supposed to be revered – because they are assumed to be the avatars of the monkey god Hanuman.

So I asked my father if he still thinks their beliefs should be respected. He said yes with some hesitation.

"What if these were not monkeys", I hypothesized, "but little human children? Should we still respect their beliefs?" After all, these skulls should be similar in proportions. I did not get a reply. But he still sticks to the 'every belief should be respected'...um, belief.

False gurus

But credulous people have mechanisms to cope with such inconsistencies. On January 2, 2003, a story broke out in Andhra Pradesh (a Southern state in the Indian Union where I am from). The story of a spiritual guru, who goes by the name of Sri Sri Sri Padma Srivallabha Venkata Visvanath, alias Rudhra Yaga Swamy, was published as front page news.

EVENTS CALENDAR

March Program

Saturday, March 8, 2003 at 2:00pm
Center for Community Cooperation
2900 Live Oak, just east of downtown Dallas

Daniel Barnett – From Roswell to the Raelians: UFOs as Religion

Never mind Whitley Streiber and *Communion*; some people claim they've been contacted by extraterrestrials – and *loved it!* In fact, religious movements have sprung up around these alleged aliens, as the recent Rael/Clonaid debacle has demonstrated. We'll be examining this phenomenon in greater detail at the February meeting.

For more info: (214) 335-9248 or check our Web site at
<http://www.ntsketics.org>

Continued on page 4

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This guru was collecting funds for a yagna (a fire worship) amounting to millions of dollars. The postal department had taken the burden of collection of funds upon themselves; a large portion had already been collected. They were selling the tickets for the swamy (amounting to US \$30 a pop). A prominent temple institution (Sri Sailam) was also involved. Local politicians, top officials and wealthy contractors were allegedly supporting the guru who was living lavishly. The cost of the yagna was 1 crore rupees – roughly \$300,000.

In this country it is quite normal for gurus to collect money for such deeds; top officials and institutions also get involved. However, this time this guru's prior life caught up with him.

His illustrious career started right from his childhood as a petty thief. He apparently graduated quickly to racketeering and duping people by many clever methods including starting fraudulent financial institutions and electronic companies, stealing film scripts etc.

When he was beaten-up for misbehaving with some women, he apparently decided that these 'petty' thefts were not for him and he opted for a grandeur scheme. He became a spiritual guru.

He cheated his disciples who came from far and wide (doesn't take any special skills to do this in this country). He collected huge amounts of money for yagnas for the benefit of mankind, for world peace, and other such causes. Just before the events were supposed to take place, however, he always disappeared with the money.

This latest one was one such event. But a police case filed by a previously duped individual caught up with him this time.

As a spiritual guru from 1991 he also perpetrated his atrocities on women. A woman allegedly committed suicide because of his "sexual attack" on her. He allegedly used to film his women disciples in compromising acts and then blackmail them.

I noticed a certain embarrassment in the people to admit that they were duped by such gurus. No one likes to be taken for a ride. It is worse for them to 'find out' that they had been taken. I think the devotees want to ignore the 'news' of bad gurus much more than the hundreds of gurus themselves. There seems to be no such thing as bad publicity in this business.

Their typical response – also that of my father – about such stories is, "Some gurus are cheats."

This time I gave the benefit of my opinion to my Dad. I told him that 'all' are.

What's in an extra "m"?

One of the wealthiest families in India, the Ambani family, owns the Reliance group, which launched a much awaited and much hyped 'code division multiple access' based nation wide cellular services recently. Reportedly an extra "m" was added to the company's name, Reliance Infocomm. Manoj Modi, considered a financial wizard and a confidant of the family, explained the reason for it, "The astrologers and numerologists decided that two m's were better than one."

I don't blame them; with billions of dollars at stake who would like to take any 'chances.' Most Indians would understand this 'logic' perfectly.

I have been working in the Telecom – or is it Telecomm!! – industry for sometime now. I am ashamed to admit that I was casual and ignorant about those pesky m's all this while.

I mistakenly thought that technology is the key factor behind a successful Telecom (or is it Telecomm?) venture.

A shoulder to cry on

Amaravathi was a seat of Buddhist establishment from the 3rd century B.C.E. until its abandonment in the 12th century C.E. It is only a few hundred miles from my place. On my visit there I sat on the banks of the mighty river Krishna while my parents went to worship in a 3rd century C.E. temple.

I was wondering why Indians spend so much money and waste so much time in worship while they can spend some of each cleaning their surroundings. There was a lot of trash on the sides of the steps spoiling the otherwise fantastic view.

Suddenly a gentleman in his fifties came and sat beside me. Interrupting my thought, he said something to the effect, "Look at those hardworking fishermen. Work in such form is commendable; wasting one's time on fruitless rituals and superstition is not. You look educated, why do you respect superstitions and not work?"

He said he is vexed with his family's superstitions. He came to the river to vent some of his frustrations. As a carpenter cum goldsmith and with little education he has no avenues for venting his frustrations. He told me that he knows no organizations though he had such views since his childhood – in spite of the over whelming beliefs to the contrary around him.

I felt bad for him but happy to have met him. Most of us are lucky to have e-mail and chat groups and clubs on the Internet where we can discuss issues with like-minded individuals from around the world. My guess is that there are a lot of people like him even in the developed countries.

Spiritual country this

We at NTS have staked \$10,000 of our money as a challenge to anyone who can provide evidence of any paranormal behavior. I feel the proof for the existence of 'soul' (spirit, atma etc) falls into the context of this challenge.

A lot of people pretend India is a spiritual country. Where does a spiritual country stand when there is no evidence of a soul?

I witnessed the invocation of mysticism, legend, hear-say, and epics as explanation for real, natural and mundane phenomenon. Genuine history is mixed with utter non-sense, giving credence to the misstatement that, "Indians don't have a sense of history." I argued with and complained to guides at some ancient sites about this. They probably felt I was a loony. At least, the feelings are mutual.

If the books that sell at railway station stalls are any indication, this country is indeed caught up in superstitious thought. Books on aroma and gemstone therapy, handwriting analysis, astrology, palmistry, numerology, vaastu or Feng Shui, prophecies,

etc. and a lot on spiritualism adorn the shelves. Some language oriented books, biographies, novels, business, and magazines complete the collection. Books on science – though one can occasionally find computer related books – are seldom found.

While the government looks for foreign investment and loans from the international banks, both money and effort are wasted here on worthless crap.

Man's service is secondary

The mother of a close friend of mine, a medical doctor by profession, has stopped her practice altogether and is on a spiritual journey to gurus and pilgrimages across the country. The well-to-do family built a lovely temple at great expense on their own premises.

I tried to reason with her and told her that she could better spend her time, money, and effort in serving needy and sick people – for free if she wants to be noble.

She said that spirituality has cured many a fatal illness, leaving even the scientists and doctors in wonderment. By going back to the "cures" of the ancients we could live like them to life spans of 100 years.

"What, according to you," I asked her, "brought up the life expectancy of the average Indian during the last 50 years from the 30s to the 60s and possibly 70s – spirituality or science?"

"Both spirituality and science should be seen in conjunction; there is but a thin veil separating the two," she told me. I felt as ignorant as ever. □

Results of NTS Annual Elections held in January

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Greg Aicklen, Laura Ainsworth, Daniel Barnett, Virginia Barnett, John Blanton, John Brandt, Prasad Golla, Steven Graf, Elizabeth Hittson, Jack Hittson, Mike Selby and Curtis Severns

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Meetings & Social Director . . .	Steven Graf

Events Calendar continued from page 1

NTS Board meeting and social dinner

Saturday, 22 March 2003, at 7:30 p.m.

Black-eyed Pea restaurant
 Forest Lane in Dallas
 South side of Forest Lane, one block west of Central Expressway

Please let us know if you are coming. We sometimes cancel or reschedule these events, and we like to contact you with an update. Send e-mail or phone the NTS hotline at 214-335-9248.

Errata

From the References of "Applied Foolishness," February newsletter:

"There is more on Harold Saxton Burr and Kirlian photography on the World Research Foundation Web site at <http://www.wrf.org/news/news0003.htm>."

The Amazing Meeting

By Bret Cantwell

There was more slight of hand than palm reading, and objects seen in the sky were identified by the three astronomers in attendance as over 250 skeptics gathered in Plantation, Florida, from January 31 to February 2 for the James Randi Educational Foundation's Amazing Meeting. From a seed planted on the JREF web site's message board for members to get together grew a conference that assembled a who's who of the skeptic movement. Presentations covered a wide range of topics of interest to skeptics and there was entertainment ranging from card tricks to a rather avant-garde presentation by a surprise guest.

Some attendees arrived early and spent the time visiting the JREF offices, taking a day trip to the Kennedy Space Center and sitting in with Randi during his weekly internet audio show on Thursday night. Randi opened the meeting Friday with a brief speech where he introduced many of the speakers and JREF employees and offered a eulogy for Isaac Asimov, Stephen J. Gould and Carl Sagan. He introduced the night master

of ceremony Jemy Ian Swiss, a magician who performed card tricks and mentalism after introducing "The Magician's Magician" Jerry Andrus.

Jerry's presentation was a melange of slight of hand, poetry and optical illusions. He had some very profound comments in his poems about the wonder of the world around us, even if you don't think some deity or higher power was responsible for creating it. His 3-D nuts optical illusion was quite a hit.

The official capstone of the evening was a presentation by Jack Horkheimer – Star Gazer where he melded Astronomy, History and Numismatics with "The Star of Cleopatra." After adjournment a large group went to the Buehler planetarium for more astronomy while others gathered in the meeting room to watch Penn and Teller's Bull... and a South Park episode that skewered John Edward.

Michael Shermer's presentation "Why We Are Moral" started the marathon Saturday session. In it he discussed his working outline for his book of the same name. *Why We Are Moral* is to be the third book of his "belief" trilogy, which included *Why People Believe Weird Things* and *How We Believe*. After Dr. Shermer's presentation, at 10:15 a.m., LTC Hal Bidlack, USAF, a key piece in the machinery of the meeting, delivered the news about the Columbia disaster. His off the cuff comments conveyed the gravity of the situation, yet stirred us to continue the meeting after an hour break to digest what had happened.

Dan Garvin's presentation was cut a bit short because of Columbia, but his "Adventures In Scientology" provided a look into the cult of Scientology and why it is so dangerous. After 25 years in Scientology's inner circle the Sea Org Garvin left in 2001 after learning about Xenu and some of the more bizarre theology of the cult.

Dan was followed by Dr. Phil Plait, aka "The Bad Astronomer." Dr. Plait discussed "Planet X," a kook astronomy claim that a brown dwarf star will arrive in May 2003 wreaking havoc and killing most people on Earth. His fast paced and hilarious presentation completely discredited Planet X claims, while his summary underscored why such claims were so dangerous by retelling the fate of the Heaven's Gate cult.

The Saturday afternoon session was started by Col. Bidlack's presentation "Lessons from Washington: The Need for Standards In the War on Terrorism." The recent craze for plastic sheeting and duct tape to create safe rooms demonstrates the key points he made. Some of the anecdotes he shared about requests for government money were eerily reminiscent of the Quadro Tracker fiasco from the mid-90s. His summarizing point was advice we should all take in this time of Level Orange terror alerts – standards need to reflect the threat we really face, not the threat we think we face.

Jack Letona's "Creating the Future of Skepticism" covered the dangers of anti-rationalism as he pointed out that we don't just oppose faith healers because they're wrong, but also because they're preventing people from getting the actual medical help they need. His vision of the future of skepticism is that we need to get the message out that we're not advocating relativism, but that we need to test and ask questions about everything, because sometimes the questions we ask are more important than the answers we get.

Aspects of the three previous speakers – the weirdness of Planet X, the need for standards and the need to test and question – were manifested in Daniel "Chip" Denman's exposé of Dr. Jacques Benveniste and "Digital Biology." A quote from the DigiBio web site sums up their claims. "Indeed, is it possible to believe that the specific activity of biologically-active molecules (e.g. histamine, caffeine, nicotine, adrenalin), not to mention the immunological signature of a virus or bacterium can be recorded and digitized using a computer sound card, just like an ordinary sound?" That's right, Benveniste is claiming that medicine can be sent by fax/modem.

Chip was involved in the statistical analysis of tests being run on the DigiBio machines. Of course the results showed they didn't work as claimed. To bolster Col. Bidlack's point earlier, Denman mentioned that the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency funded DigiBio to see if their machines could possibly be a way of delivering medicines to troops in the field. Chip's presentation was followed by a panel discussion featuring Shermer, Garvin, Plait, Latona and Denman. The Q&A was especially nice since it allowed Dan to cover more details about Scientology and his life with them than his shortened presentation allowed.

The Saturday evening session started off with the ubiquitous Col. Bidlack doing "Hamilton Lives." His presentation must be seen to be appreciated. "Hamilton Lives" involved a discussion of Hamilton's life in character followed by an in character question and answer session. General Hamilton was followed by Bob Carroll of the Skeptic's Dictionary. His presentation, "Onward Christian Soldiers: The Holy War on Science" primarily focused on the continuing battle by the religious right against evolution. He also covered in detail the tactic change many creationists are adopting, the advocacy of Intelligent Design.

Saturday wrapped up with what was listed in the program as "A General Tirade...." by Randi himself. He discussed the day's events, some of the speakers and the content of their presentations and then performed a few mentalist tricks to the delight of the audience.

Sunday kicked off with Randi's protégé and gatekeeper for the \$1 mil JREF Paranormal Challenge – Andrew Harter – who discussed "Teaching Critical Thinking." His presentation concentrated on reaching out to teenagers with the skeptical mes-

sage. Next up came a panel discussion led by Lisa Goodlin of the Central New York Skeptics on "Starting a Skeptics Group." The panel featured founders of groups from across the nation and the topics ranged from what it takes to get a skeptics group up and running to ideas for getting press, like paranormal challenge prizes.

After a short break, the attendees were asked to please fill in the first 3 rows of the meeting room in preparation for the special guest. Some thought it might be Gallagher, but his appearance would have been rather mundane compared to what actually happened. Randi, with much fanfare introduced – Carlos, not performance actor Jose Alvarez who portrays Carlos, but Carlos.

The appearance was actually Jose doing a performance piece as Carlos. He was quite approachable later in the day as Jose, but his being in character, the presence of Harter and Randi with camera equipment and the presentation of a rather enigmatic short film he'd made, was the source of much confusion during and speculation immediately after his presentation.

The concluding Sunday afternoon session was the time for the presentation of papers. Professor Ray Hall - "The Age of the Earth."

Professor Charles Wynn - "Educating College Students about Skepticism."

Maira Benjamin – "The JREF Forum."

Jim Underdown of the Center for Inquiry West – "They See Dead People—Or Do They?"

Professor Jeff Corey – "The Watson Card Problem"

Greg Winslow – "An Empirical Investigation of the Effects of Penta Water."

Professor John Brown, Astronomer Royal of Scotland – "Astronomy – The Ultimate Magic Show."

Professor Taner Edis – "Skeptics and Religion."

Randi thanked all the organizers and attendees and emphatically pronounced The Amazing Meeting was such a success there would be another in 2004. And before we adjourned he gave a parting gift to the attendees. In his book *The Truth About Uri Geller* he writes about an appearance with Barbara Walters where he duplicates a clairvoyance, one of Geller's tricks. In the book he did not say *how* he did it though. As the meeting drew to a close, Randi ran a tape of that appearance. He then explained how he did it and even rewound the tape so that we might catch where he does it. The Amazing Meeting was truly amazing.



Letters to the Editor

We welcome letters from our readers. Please make your comments brief and related to topics of interest to NTS members. Letters must be signed, and are subject to editing for space considerations.

Letters:

[We previously commented on William J. Gibbons' story of the search for the Mokele-mbembe. He has followed up on that publication with a short note to us, which we now publish in its entirety. Gibbons' unvarnished narrative so well reveals the worth of "creation science" that we can't think of anything to add. Enjoy. – Editor]

Greetings,

Before I write one word, please forgive this long delay in replying to your email. With recently moving house and my computer going on the blink (and the loss of much of my email), it has taken quite a bit of work to catch up with everyone.

Now, in reference to your critique of the article I wrote for the ICR on Mokele-mbembe (Impact # 349), you asked what my thoughts would be regarding the impact the discovery of Mokele-mbembe would make on the creation-evolution question?

Answer: I shudder to think!

But I think we should look at what this animal might actually be. British explorer & author, Redmond O'Hanlon, wrote in his book No Mercy, A Journey into the Heart of the Congo, that he thought that Mokele-mbembes were mere mis-identified elephants crossing the river with their trunks in the air. This is the very best way to insult all the tribal groups living in the Likouala swamps of the northern Congo, as they are perfectly familiar with elephants, hippos, and the animal called Mokele-mbembe that actually kills both if provoked. Of all the eye-witnesses that I have personally interviewed be they pygmy, Bantu, or Fang, the descriptions are always the same. There are however distinct differences between the Mokele-mbembes of the Congo and those observed in Cameroon. In the Congo, the animals are described as approximating the size of a hippopotamus, with a neck about six feet in length, topped by a lizard or snake-like head. The tail is also long and flexible, and is used in com-

bat against elephants, hippos, or to capsize canoes. The general color of the animals is reddish-brown, and some specimens sport a comb-like frill that runs from the top of the head down the back of the neck. In Cameroon, however, the animals are reported to be quite enormous - almost the size of the Diplodocus, with elephant-gray skin, and a series of dermal spikes running the length of the head, neck, back and tail. So why the difference in the two animals? I have pondered on this for some time, and believe we could be dealing with either (A) adult and juvenile "MM's," or (B) sexual dimorphism, or (C) two different species of sauropod dinosaur. I do not think, however, that the latter is very likely. Perhaps the adult MMs breed and lay their eggs in the Likouala swamps, where the young hatch and remain until they eventually migrate back up the deep, broad rivers of Cameroon to continue the cycle. The difference in coloration (reddish brown) and the comb-like frill may be particular to the juvenile MM, with the changes in the physical characteristics and skin color occurring during the growth period to maturity. Or, the smaller MMs represent the female of the species. Either way, mere conjecture of this kind will not convince the scientific community that MM exists at all, never mind be a living dinosaur.

But the eye-witness testimonials are very difficult to dismiss. Here are simply tribespeople that are not literate, possess no books, radios, television sets, and have very little contact with the outside world. According to my guide, Pierre Sima, a Cameroonian plantation owner, no whiteman has ever been into this particular region of Cameroon in search of the MM. Also, the pygmies were astonished to see a picture of MM (sauropod dinosaur) in my illustrations. They cannot understand why a whiteman who comes from a land so far away from them has a picture of MM in his book. For example, I tried a flip chart approach, showing the pygmies pictures of North American animals such as the bear, the racoon and the Moose. They did not recognize any of them and quickly dismissed them. Then I showed the pygmies pictures of known African animals such as the elephant, the gorilla and the chimpanzee, which they quickly recognised as animals they are familiar with and have hunted from time to time. I asked the eye-witnesses who have claimed to have seen MM to draw a picture of the animal in the dirt. So they took a twig and drew a vague sauropod-like shape. Finally, I opened my flip chart on dinosaurs and let the pygmies flick through the pages in their own time. About 98% of all dinosaur pics were rejected, with the exception of two. These were the sauropods and the triceratops - of all things. When I questioned them about the triceratops, they explained that it looked just like a large quadruped that lives

Skeptic Ink

by Prasad Golla and John Blanton.

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in the savannah region between the Boumba River and the border with the Central African Republic. The animal possesses a neck frill (which differs in size between the male and female) and up to four horns protruding from its head armor. The tail, however, was described as being long and thin like that of an elephant. The skin texture is also reminiscent of an elephant. Again, the animal is said to be very aggressive and will attack and disembowel any elephant that it encounters (territorial behaviour?) The clue here comes in the description of its skin color and the thin tail. It is more likely that this animal could be a hitherto unknown species of armored rhino, rather than a living triceratops. But, hopefully we will find out one day.

But what of Mokele-mbembe? Well, the clues are like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, in which the pieces must be put together in order to form a picture. What we know about MM is this:

- 1). It is a very large animal - in very rare cases almost the size of its fossil counterpart, diplodocus (if it is a dinosaur).
- 2). Its diet is entirely vegetable - leaves and fruits for the most part.
- 3). It is almost entirely semi-aquatic - only venturing out of the water and onto land in search of its food supply, and even then its sticks close to the water.
- 4). It is a very aggressive creature and will attack hippos, elephants, and even canoes that venture too close to it.
- 5). Its general description does not match any creature that is currently included within the repertoire of contemporary zoology.

6). It has been observed very recently in the Boumba river, Cameroon, by two security guards.

7). They are solitary creatures for the most part, only being seen in groups of two or three during the rainy season (when most tropical reptiles breed).

Is Mokele-mbembe a living dinosaur? I do not know for certain. It could well be a mammal of some kind that has the outline appearance of a dinosaur. Or a new species of reptile awaiting official discovery and classification. Either way, I will be happy to locate and film a specimen, and let the experts take over from there. As for the possibility of it being a living dinosaur - well, the list of living fossils is impressive, and perhaps Mokele-mbembe will be another to add to the list - eventually. How will this impact the creation/evolution question? I think that the ensuing controversy will be all too inevitable. Creationists will tout MM as a survivor of the Flood (its ancestors being safely housed on Noah's Ark), and now living out their last days in the swamps of Central Africa (and possibly South America and Papua New Guinea). The evolutionists will contend that this particular species of dinosaur simply found a niche in the swamps of Central Africa and took advantage of it. Historically, if we are to accept some historical writings and various depictions of what could be dinosaurs interacting with humans, then it is clear that not only has the range of Mokele-mbembe been greatly reduced over the past 200 years (in Africa at least), but they could be on the way out (extinction). My only desire now is to "capture" at least one specimen on film before this happens.

Best Wishes,

Bill Gibbons

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Signature _____ Date _____